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EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION REGARDING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21 AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL: GUIDELINES TO THE SECRETARIAT FOR ORGANIZING INFORMATION PROVIDED BY GOVERNMENTS, INCLUDING INFORMATION IN THE FORM OF PERIODIC COMMUNICATIONS OR NATIONAL REPORTS AND NATIONAL AGENDA 21 ACTION PLANS REGARDING THE ACTIVITIES THEY UNDERTAKE TO IMPLEMENT AGENDA 21, THE PROBLEMS THEY FACE, SUCH AS THOSE RELATED TO FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER, AND OTHER ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES THEY FIND RELEVANT

Report of the Secretary-General

1. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in paragraph 38.38 of Agenda 21, 1/ recommended "that States could consider the preparation of national reports. In this context, the organs of the United Nations system should, upon request, assist countries, in particular developing countries. Countries could also consider the preparation of national action plans for the implementation of Agenda 21". Furthermore, the functions of the Commission on Sustainable Development should include the following: "to consider information provided by Governments, including, for example, information in the form of periodic communications or national reports regarding the activities they undertake to implement Agenda 21, the problems they face, such as problems related to financial resources and technology transfer, and other environment and development issues they find relevant". 2/

2. In this connection, it might be useful to briefly recapitulate the experience gained from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development process. In paragraph 11 of section II of its resolution 44/228 of 22 December 1989, the General Assembly invited all States to take an active part

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* E/CN.17/1993/4.

in the preparations for the Conference, to prepare national reports, as appropriate, to be submitted to the Preparatory Committee in a timely manner, and to promote international cooperation and broad-based national preparatory processes involving the scientific community, industry, trade unions and concerned non-governmental organizations. In its decision 1/24, at its first session the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development recommended the revised guidelines suggested by the Secretary-General of the Conference in his report on suggested guidelines for the preparation of national reports (A/CONF.151/PC/8 and Add.1) as a broad framework for countries to follow in the preparation of their national reports.

3. Although the suggested deadline for the receipt of national reports was July 1991, the secretariat continued to receive and accept such reports up to the time of the Conference itself. A handful of reports were received even after that date and the final number of national, territorial and regional reports received by the secretariat totalled 169 and covered some 180 countries and territories. In total, those reports comprise more than 20,000 pages of valuable information.

4. Experience showed that the one-year period provided initially for the preparation of national reports based on suggested guidelines was insufficient. Likewise the reports varied widely in format and size, ranging from a few odd pages to in excess of 600. Thus the analysis of national reports became cumbersome: it was difficult to extract information and achieve uniformity. A longer lead-time and more precise guidelines would have resulted in better reports.

5. In preparing the national reports about 75 per cent of Governments formed United Nations Conference on Environment and Development committees, usually chaired by their Ministry of Foreign Affairs or their Ministry of the Environment, with representatives of various ministries and government institutions as well as non-governmental organizations. This kind of committee work appears to have been useful for the complex multisectoral and cross-sectoral United Nations Conference on Environment and Development process; and Governments could be encouraged to maintain similar committees and identify a focal point (a specific function in some ministry or office), since much of the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development will continue to require multisectoral inputs.

6. The role of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) field offices in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development preparations was a critical one. Many countries would have taken a much longer time to prepare their report had it not been for the presence of, and often for the financial support obtained through, UNDP. Thus the Commission could also communicate, presumably through the United Nations resident coordinators or UNDP offices, where relevant in the field, with this focal point.

7. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development secretariat processed the national reports submitted to the Conference and decided to organize them on the basis of comparability. In order to do this, the material contained in the reports was analysed and presented under the following common headings in the publication entitled Nations of the Earth Report: 3/

(a) Drafting process;

(b) Problem areas;

(c) Past and present capacity-building initiatives;

(d) Recommendations and priorities on environment and development;

(e) Financial arrangements and funding requirements;

(f) Environmentally sound technologies;

(g) International cooperation;

(h) Expectations from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

8. In the post-United Nations Conference on Environment and Development period, these headings would need to be modified to focus more specifically on present and planned activities for the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national, regional and subregional levels, highlighting both opportunities and problems faced by countries, including problems related to financial resources and technology.

9. The Secretary-General of the United Nations suggests that it would be extremely useful for Governments to follow some standardized format in preparing their reports/communications for the Commission. This format could take into account the agreed guidelines for the United Nations Secretariat on organizing information received from Governments, as well as the format and themes of reports to be prepared for the Commission by the Secretary-General. This would allow the Secretary-General to ensure a more focused and coherent analysis of information and data received from member States. Furthermore, the Secretary-General finds that it would be important for Governments, in considering ways of presenting their reports, to take into account the following observations of a more general and more technical nature:

(a) Submitted reports/communications should be in any one of the official languages of the United Nations;

(b) Reports/communications should follow a suggested format and length (not to exceed 50 pages); they could even be presented more in the manner of statistical sheets offering hard facts and less text;

(c) Reports/communications should, to the extent possible, refer to specific facts and data in the report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, thus reflecting any change (improvement or worsening of a situation). Such facts and data could be presented on a sectoral or cross-sectoral basis reflecting the structure of Agenda 21;

(d) Reports/communications should be submitted to the Secretariat at least three months prior to the beginning of a given session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, if they are to be included in relevant report(s) of the

Secretary-General to be prepared for submission to the Commission at that session.

Notes

1/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8), resolution 1, annex II.

2/ Ibid., para. 38.13 (b).

3/ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.92.I.18.